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Félix Bonfils,

Grande pyramide de Cheops / Great Pyramid of Giza, ca. 1880

113 Grande pyramide de Cheops

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FELIX BONFILS

(Saint-Hippolyte-du-Fort 1831 – 1885 Alès)

GRANDE PYRAMIDE DE CHEOPS / GREAT PYRAMID OF GIZA CA. 1880

Titled and numbered in the negative

Albumen print

22 x 28.5 cm; (8 3/4 x 11 1/4 in.)

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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Félix Bonfils's *Grande pyramide de Cheops* belongs to the celebrated corpus of nineteenth-century photography through which the monuments of Egypt were transformed from distant antiquities into tangible visual experiences for European audiences. Dating to approximately 1880, the photograph presents the Great Pyramid of Giza with the clarity and monumental restraint characteristic of Bonfils's architectural views. More than a straightforward record of one of antiquity's most enduring monuments, the image exemplifies the manner in which photography came to mediate the encounter between the modern traveller and the ancient Egyptian landscape.

The Great Pyramid, constructed during the Fourth Dynasty for the pharaoh Khufu, represents the largest and oldest of the three principal pyramids at Giza. Built upon the elevated plateau west of the Nile Valley, the monument originally formed the centrepiece of an extensive funerary complex comprising temples, causeways, subsidiary pyramids and cemeteries. Its immense scale and extraordinary survival made it one of the principal destinations for European travellers and, by the nineteenth century, one of the most frequently photographed monuments in Egypt. Bonfils's photograph participates in this established visual tradition while benefiting from the increasing technical sophistication of nineteenth-century photography.

Bonfils approached Egypt as part of a wider photographic enterprise encompassing the archaeological and cultural landscapes of the Eastern Mediterranean. Born in Saint-Hippolyte-du-Fort in southern France, he initially trained and worked as a bookbinder before joining General d'Hautpoul's expedition to the Levant in 1860. Following his return, he became a professional photographer, and in 1867 moved with his family to Beirut, where the Bonfils photographic studio, *Maison Bonfils*, was established. From this base the family developed an extraordinarily extensive archive of views of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Greece. By 1871 Bonfils reported having produced approximately 15,000 prints and 9,000 stereoscopic views—a remarkable indication of both the scale of the enterprise and the enormous demand for photographic images of the region.

The production of such photographs required considerable technical discipline. Bonfils worked with glass plates coated in collodion and sensitised with silver nitrate. Because these plates were prepared immediately before exposure, the photographer was required to carry much of the necessary equipment into the field, exposing and developing the negatives on location. The resulting glass negatives could subsequently be used to produce multiple prints, allowing important monuments such as the Great Pyramid to circulate widely through the international market.

The albumen print was particularly important to this process. Paper coated with albumen—egg white—provided a smooth and receptive surface for the photographic image, producing the characteristic luminous detail and warm golden-brown tonalities associated with nineteenth-century architectural photography. Bonfils's photographs consequently possess a distinctive combination of technical precision and visual beauty. The medium was capable of recording the immense planes and

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subtle weathering of ancient stone while retaining the atmospheric qualities of the Egyptian environment.

The present photograph is titled and numbered directly in the negative, identifying it as part of Bonfils's organised commercial corpus. Such inscriptions were integral to the circulation of his photographs, enabling individual views to be catalogued, reproduced and acquired as part of a coherent series. The Great Pyramid itself, rendered against the expansive Giza landscape, becomes both archaeological monument and image of cultural memory: a structure whose overwhelming physical permanence is paradoxically fixed here within the comparatively fragile medium of photographic paper.

Bonfils's significance ultimately lies in this dual capacity. His photographs were products of a sophisticated commercial studio, yet they also constitute an important visual archive of the nineteenth-century Near East and Egypt. Through *Grande pyramide de Cheops*, the Great Pyramid is presented with an immediacy unavailable to earlier generations of European viewers. The photograph therefore belongs to a pivotal moment in the history of Egyptian representation, when photography began to replace the drawn view as one of the principal means through which antiquity was observed, documented and disseminated to the modern world.

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